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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the application of discourse analysis to second language teaching and learning. It provides examples of how teachers can improve their teaching practices by investigating actual language use both in and out of the classroom, and how students can learn language through exposure to different types of discourse. (VWL)

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Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers

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What Is Discourse Analysis?

Discourse analysis is the examination of language use by members of a speech community. It involves looking at both language form and language function and includes the study of both spoken interaction and written texts. It identifies linguistic features that characterize different genres as well as social and cultural factors that aid in our interpretation and understanding of different texts and types of talk. A discourse analysis of written texts might include a study of topic development and cohesion across the sentences, while an analysis of spoken language might focus on these aspects plus turn-taking practices, opening and closing sequences of social encounters, or narrative structure.

The study of discourse has developed in a variety of disciplines—sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. Thus discourse analysis takes different theoretical perspectives and analytic approaches: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variation analysis (Schiffrin, 1994). Although each approach emphasizes different aspects of language use, they all view language as social interaction.

This digest focuses on the application of discourse analysis to second language teaching and learning. It provides examples of how teachers can improve their teaching practices by investigating actual language use both in and out of the classroom, and how students can learn language through exposure to different types of discourse. Detailed introductions to discourse analysis, with special attention to the needs and experiences of language teachers, can be found in Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), Hatch (1992), McCarthy (1992), McCarthy and Carter (1994), and Riggenbach (1999).

Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching

Even with the most communicative approaches, the second language classroom is limited in its ability to develop learners' communicative competence in the target language. This is due to the restricted number of contact hours with the language; minimal opportunities for interacting with native speakers; and limited exposure to the variety of functions, genres, speech events, and discourse types that occur outside the classroom. Given the limited time available for students to practice the target language, teachers should maximize opportunities for student participation. Classroom research is one way for teachers to monitor both the quantity and quality of students' output. By following a four-part process of Record-View-Transcribe-Analyze, second language teachers can use discourse analytic techniques to investigate the interaction patterns in their classrooms and to see how these patterns promote or hinder opportunities for learners to practice the target language. This process allows language teachers to study their own teaching behavior—specifically, the frequency, distribution, and types of questions they use and their effect on students' responses.

Step One: Videotape a complete lesson. Be sure to capture all of your questions and the students' responses. (Opportunities to speak the target language are often created by teachers' questions.)

Step Two: Watch the videotape. As you watch it, think about the types of questions you asked. Look for recurring patterns in your questioning style and the impact it has on the students' responses.

Step Three: Transcribe the lesson. A transcript will make it easier to identify the types of questions in the data and to focus on specific questions and student responses.

Step Four: Analyze the videotape and transcript. Why did you ask each question? What type of question was it—open (e.g., "What points do you think the author was making in the chapter you read yesterday?") or closed (e.g., "Did you like the chapter?")? Was the question effective in terms of your goals for teaching and learning? What effect did your questions have on the students' opportunities to practice the target language? How did the students respond to different types of questions? Were you satisfied with their responses? Which questions elicited the most discussion from the students? Did the students ask any questions? Focusing on actual classroom interaction, teachers can investigate how one aspect of their teaching style affects students' opportunities for speaking the target language. They can then make changes that will allow students more practice with a wider variety of discourse types.

Teachers can also use this process of Record-View-Transcribe-Analyze to study communication patterns in different classroom activities, such as student-to-student interactions during a paired role-play task and during a small-group cooperative learning activity. Communicative activities are expected to promote interaction and to provide opportunities for students to engage in talk. Teachers are likely to discover that students produce different speech patterns in response to different tasks. For example, a map activity is likely to elicit a series of questions and answers among participants, whereas a picture narration task requires a monologue developed around a narrative format. Given that teachers use communicative tasks to evaluate learners' proficiency, a better understanding of the influence of specific activities on learner discourse will likely lead teachers to use a greater variety of tasks in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of students' abilities. By recording, transcribing, and analyzing students' discourse, teachers can gain insight into the effect of specific tasks on students' language production and, over time, on their language development.

A discourse analysis of classroom interactions can also shed light on cross-cultural linguistic patterns that may be leading to communication difficulties. For example, some speakers may engage in overlap, speaking while someone else is taking a turn-at-talk. For some linguistic groups, this discourse behavior can be interpreted as a signal of engagement and involvement; however, other speakers may view it as an interruption and imposition on their speaking rights. Teachers can use the Record-View-Transcribe-Analyze technique to study cross-cultural interactions in their classrooms, helping students identify different communication strategies and their potential for miscommunication.

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Although some variables of language learning are beyond the control of second language teachers, discourse analysis can be a useful analytic tool for making informed changes in instructional practices. Mainstream teachers, especially those with second language learners, can also use this technique to study classroom interactions in order to focus on the learning opportunities available to students with limited English proficiency. In fact, discourse analysis can be an integral part of a program of professional development for all teachers that includes classroom-based research, with the overall aim of improving teaching (Johnson, 1995).

Discourse Analysis and Second Language Learning

Language learners face the monumental task of acquiring not only new vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and phonology, but also discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and interactional competence. They need opportunities to investigate the systematicity of language at all linguistic levels, especially at the highest level (Riggenbach, 1999; Young and He, 1998). Without knowledge of and experience with the discourse and sociocultural patterns of the target language, second language learners are likely to rely on the strategies and expectations acquired as part of their first language development, which may be inappropriate for the second language setting and may lead to communication difficulties and misunderstandings.

One problem for second language learners is limited experience with a variety of interactive practices in the target language. Therefore, one of the goals of second language teaching is to expose learners to different discourse patterns in different texts and interactions. One way that teachers can include the study of discourse in the second language classroom is to allow the students themselves to study language, that is, to make them discourse analysts (see Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Riggenbach, 1999). By exploring natural language use in authentic environments, learners gain a greater appreciation and understanding of the discourse patterns associated with a given genre or speech event as well as the sociolinguistic factors that contribute to linguistic variation across settings and contexts. For example, students can study speech acts in a service encounter, turn-taking patterns in a conversation between friends, opening and closings of answering machine messages, or other aspects of speech events. Riggenbach (1999) suggests a wide variety of activities that can easily be adapted to suit a range of second language learning contexts.

One discourse feature that is easy to study is listener response behavior, also known as backchannels. Backchannels are the brief verbal responses that a listener uses while another individual is talking, such as mm-hmm, ok, yeah, and oh wow. Listener response can also be non-verbal, for instance head nods. Research has identified variation among languages in the use of backchannels, which makes it an interesting feature to study. Variation has been found not only in the frequency of backchannels, but also in the type of backchannels, their placement in the ongoing talk, and their interpretation by the participants (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, & Tao, 1996). Students can participate in the Record-View-Transcribe-Analyze technique to study the linguistic form and function of backchannels in conversation.

Step One: Ask to video- or audiotape a pair of native speakers engaging in conversation, perhaps over coffee or lunch.

Step Two: Play the tape for students. Have them identify patterns in the recorded linguistic behavior. In this case, pay attention to the backchanneling behavior of the participants. Is the same backchannel token used repeatedly, or is there variation?

Step Three: Transcribe the conversation so that students can count the number and types of backchannel tokens and examine their placement within the discourse.

Step Four: Have students analyze specific discourse features individually, in pairs, or in small groups. These are some questions to consider: How often do the participants use a backchannel token? How does backchanneling contribute to the participants' understanding of and involvement in the conversation? How can differences in backchannel frequency be explained? How does backchanneling work in the students' native language?

Students can collect and analyze data themselves. Once collected, this set of authentic language data can be repeatedly examined for other conversational features, then later compared to discourse features found in other speech events. This discourse approach to language learning removes language from the confines of textbooks and makes it tangible, so that students can explore language as interaction rather than as grammatical units. Teachers can also use these activities to raise students' awareness of language variation, dialect differences, and cultural diversity.

Conclusion

In sum, teachers can use discourse analysis not only as a research method for investigating their own teaching practices but also as a tool for studying interactions among language learners. Learners can benefit from using discourse analysis to explore what language is and how it is used to achieve communicative goals in different contexts. Thus discourse analysis can help to create a second language learning environment that more accurately reflects how language is used and encourages learners toward their goal of proficiency in another language.

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